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April 11, 1989

The ExComm as Big Con Big Stone

Consider the Executive Committee of the National Security Council as largely a consensus-building exercise, not a genuine search for policy. *To get wholesale, "post hoc" in style (water down con)*

--Only the President, RFK and O'Donnell knew the place was wired. Contrary to Schell on Nixon, this didn't mean the President was stripping himself of his own privacy, or depriving himself of "wild, crazy ideas" (see review in Times Book Review); the others didn't know, and he didn't have to rein himself in (any more than Nixon did) because he didn't expect them to find out; only he would control the use of the transcripts, if any. (This expectation was fulfilled; the secret didn't get out for 25 years).

--The value of the transcripts--compared to earlier versions by participants--shows what the Nixon tapes on national security would be worth. (We don't even have insider accounts of those sessions comparable to Schlesinger and Sorensen).

Stone
--Big Con: a number of people involved are in the know, and are coordinating a pretense, a hoax, while one or more are not in the know--and cannot imagine that they confronting a conspiracy of silence and deception, coordinated behavior, apparently spontaneous.

--All government at this level has something of that character, i.e., every "big" meeting--almost by definition, a group in which there are different levels and types of clearances among the people present.

--But that is one reason real exploration and decision-making is almost never done in big meetings. By JFK least of all. Contrary to an impression, he did not learn otherwise from Cuba I--nor should he have. He learned from Neustadt to avoid all big meetings and committees, and did this.

--So why this time? (Why never again--did he?) There was less time than usual for fooling around with people whose advice was not wanted--except to get them aboard.

--Why was Dillon there? Republican...hawk...Secretary of the Treasury! The President, and McNamara as well, disagreed with almost every one of his opinions, from start to finish...as could be predicted. They hadn't filled him in before...he apparently was not involved either in Cuba I or Mongoose, even though he had been involved in planning for Cuba I under Eisenhower, in State. (And he strongly blamed JFK for failure of Cuba I, refusal to give air cover!) No one had told him of the

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new strategic estimates: Nitze had to give him the word during the crisis. The only perceptible value of having him there was that he was induced--by RFK--to change his position from immediate airstrike to blockade.

My hypothesis here is that that is precisely why he was there (and, and for him to understand that JFK's own "shift" was likewise induced by a group consensus in this direction): and indeed, that this "education" of Douglas Dillon was a major reason for the ExComm exercise.

--Could this apply to McCone, too? He was already suspected of leaking to his fellow Republican Keating. To have him present during the meeting was hard to avoid--a reason for avoiding meetings for real discussion, as would be normal!

--Notice the presence of people at the meeting that could not be told key aspects of what was being done or considered: as, the instructions for RFK on October 27 (which seem to have been modified by a still smaller group, perhaps just the President: again, normal). Most members were never told even afterward what he had discussed; and almost none, what the President discussed with Rusk.

Thus, even on this record, the ExComm had aspects of a Big Con--misleading key figures about the history of the episode forever afterward, distorting any "lessons" they might draw about it (as the President, and others mainly in the know, would realize. Recall Bundy's skepticism about the value of my proposed lesson-learning project in 1964--justified, but exaggerated--and his refusal to cooperate.

--But the Kennedy School seminars have, too, an aspect of Big Con. Not only did Blight fail to imagine, in designing the project, that individuals might intentionally and knowingly conceal and mislead; he imagined still less that they might concert in this--not by explicit agreement, but by maintaining a joint silence on certain matters that they had practiced at the time and for a quarter of a century afterwards.

--Specifically, none has ever commented on what each and all of them have kept silent about that whole time: that the position for which Stevenson was singled out to be denounced for--by the President, almost surely, for the ultimate condemnation: appeaser, seeker of a Munich, weak, womanly--was (except for the matter of timing of the proposal) a position held by the President himself, repeatedly brought up almost alone at the climax of the crisis! (The Big Con aspect of the ExComm almost fell apart at this point; the President was failing to generate consensus for his own clear preference. That might have made it too dangerous and difficult for him to pursue his preference from the beginning, to back out from his threats of attack with a trade. Thus see the fear and near-dispair of those who wanted to avoid attack, as they saw him "pressured" toward an attack. This

is a clear risk in big meetings, which is why they are usually avoided; yet normally, the President's is the only vote that counts, the others usually fall in line anyway, and he can always terminate the meeting, without showing his hand if he wants. Under the pressure of events, this process was getting out of hand. Hence, perhaps, the President's desperate effort at an ultimatum, a last, small chance to achieve a win, without backing down and without attacking.

All still protect him, and the cleanliness of their victory-- hiding how close they came to a "shameful defeat," wrought by their leader--by describing the open trade as "inconceivable," knowing this to be untrue.

--Note the episode in Allison, in 1963, Vietnam, when JFK describes the "inner circle", and McG comments on consensus-building. Also, Berman and McG's description of July, 1965. (Does Janis really allow for this purpose of meetings? Or, the general tendency to follow the President?)

--Key bit of evidence in O'Donnell: JFK tells RFK--on Thursday? --that what he wants is for RFK to build a consensus for blockade: which he does, with his Pearl Harbor argument. (No commentator has picked this up, and mentioned the possibility that the President was behind RFK's advocacy).

If the President's threat of attack on Cuba was a bluff, it too had the character of a Big Con--though those in the know might have been very few (McNamara, Sorensen, RFK, McG, . . . Rusk? O'Donnell?)

Yet the President could have been pushed over the threshhold into a non-nuclear attack: if he failed to get a working consensus against this, and if various circumstances arose.

Big question: Could he have been pushed even further, across the threshhold of tactical nuclear operations; or beyond that, strategic operations?

Perhaps what Bundy is saying to me is that he believes the answer to this last question is No. But is he right?

He probably would apply this to LBJ, too; perhaps Carter. But is this true for Eisenhower or Nixon? I think almost surely not. Reagan? Ford? Bush? I doubt it.

Moreover, the fact that these later Presidents came to power is in part due to the decision by JFK and LBJ never to challenge either Cold War or nuclear orthodoxy: never to change the framework of global confrontation or reliance on nuclear threats, never to attempt Candor or New Thinking (except for JFK's American University speech: eroded weeks later by his statements in Berlin).

In response to Bundy's challenge to me --"But you never say that, Dan!" (that LBJ would probably not have carried out recommendations to use nuclear weapons at Khe Sanh)--I could say:

All presidents since Harry Truman have shown themselves, in crises, to be strongly reluctant actually to launch nuclear weapons: whatever they said in public. In several cases, at least, this may have amounted to a strong personal determination, a private commitment, never to initiate the use of nuclear weapons under any circumstances. This may have been true of JFK and LBJ (it was McNamara's recommendation, his own commitment, and his view of their attitudes). It might (or might not) have been true of Carter as well.

It almost surely was not true of Nixon or Eisenhower, and seems very unlikely for Reagan and Ford or Bush.

But even those with a private policy of "no first use" (if this was the case) confronted strong pressures within their own administrations, as well as outside, to be willing to use nuclear weapons first in combat "if necessary"--to prepare for this, to avoid ruling it out in principle or in practice, to announce this readiness in internal, classified policy statements--and to threaten their use, when threats were necessary in crises.

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All our presidents, in fact, yielded to such pressures to make threats or preparations in crises, whether reluctantly or not. This included even those presidents determined not to carry out such threats--for whom, then, the threats constituted, in their minds, bluffs (in some cases intended to impress allies or domestic elements, including some in the US government, more than the adversaries). These same presidents were extremely reluctant to admit, to themselves or others, then or later, that they had made nuclear threats at all, as are subordinates like Bundy and McNamara; but they did.